COKESBURY COLLEGE.

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Cokesbury College

THE

First Methodist Institution

FOR

Higher Education

BY

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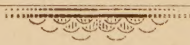
The first Methodist College in the world, Cokesbury, located at Abingdon, Md., was destroyed by fire in 1795. A century later, on Oct. 18, 1895, a pilgrimage was made to the site of the College by the Methodists of Maryland. In the celebration of the day, the Harford County Historical Society also joined. Memorial Stones were placed at the four corners of the foundation of the College building, an historical address was made by Bernard C. Steiner, Ph.D., and other commemorative addresses were delivered by Bishop C. D. Foss, Dr. G. W. Archer, Dr. J. F. Goucher, Prof. E. B. Prettyman and Dr. S. L. Beiler. The historical address seemed of sufficient permanent interest to warrant its publication in pamphlet form.

COMMITTEE.



COKESBURY COLLEGE.

A century ago the pioneer bishop, Francis Asbury, penned these words in his journal: "We have a second and confirmed report that Cokesbury College is consumed to ashes—a sacrifice of £10,000 in about ten years." Laboring among the distant rice fields of South Carolina the courageous preacher lost heart at this terrible misfortune, this sudden destruction of long cherished hopes, and, in his despair, he wrote: "If any man should give me £10,000 to do and suffer again what I have done for that house I would not do it. The Lord called not Mr. Whitefield nor the Methodists to build colleges. I wished only for schools; Dr. Coke wanted a college." It was a blow to the enterprise from which it did not recover.

The first Methodist college in the world had had no truer friend than Asbury. It had been in his thoughts and prayers.

For its interests he had planned and labored. In its service he had spent many toilsome days. From its very inception he had been faithful in its service. To obtain financial support for it and the "poor orphans" there, he had gone "from house to house, through the snow and cold, begging money." But now his heart failed him. Humanly speaking, the work of years had been totally destroyed in a few minutes, through the work of some enemy, who set fire to the college building. The enterprise could not be carried on in the old way. The Methodists had yet forty years to wait, ere they should obtain a permanent college of their own.

It is true that a continuation of Cokesbury lasted for yet another year, not at Abingdon, but at Baltimore; but this has none of the old collegiate idea. Asbury might write of it, "the academy is full," but he no longer referred to the College. This academy, too, was to perish in fire. It lasted only a year, when a fire consumed the building in which it was located, and, at this second disaster, Asbury could

find no consolation, but that "God loveth the people of Baltimore and he will keep them poor to make them pure, and it will be for the humiliation of the Society."

At this double disaster, even Coke's courage failed, and the attempt to have an educational institution was given up for the time. It was a brave attempt and pluckily carried on in the face of great obstacles. If it had succeeded, and at one time it came near to success, the whole history of Methodist educational effort would have been changed and at the head of her institutions in point of age would have been a venerable college, commemorating in its name the first two bishops of the church.

Education in Maryland had received comparatively little attention in colonial days. The larger planters had private teachers for their children, and when the youth had grown to need more extensive instruction than could be thus obtained, they were sent across the water to Europe, or to institutions in other States. Nearly a century after the founding of the Colony,

the Assembly established a grammar school in each county, and these, with a few private schools in the towns, were the only educational institutions in the State, until the end of the war of the Revolution. The first college in the State was only two years old when the famous Christmas Conference of 1784 was held at Baltimore. The people were not accustomed to the support of educational institutions, and indeed a large part of the population, doubtless, had very faint ideas as to what a college was intended to accomplish for those who studied within its walls.

If this was one obstacle, it was not the only one; the whole country was just recovering from a long and exhausting war. The governmental condition of affairs was quite unsettled and was destined to remain so for five years more. Such times are unfavorable for the establishment of new institutions, nor did the Methodist churches possess numbers or wealth sufficient to counterbalance these drawbacks. There were only some fifteen thousand in America, who had as yet

united themselves with Wesley's Church and they were far from being a rich or a compact body of men. The church itself had received no permanent organization and until that indispensable preliminary should have been accomplished, would it be safe to embark in any untried enterprise, which might not be suited to the genius of the ecclesiastical body? All these objections and many more were overborne by the zeal and faith of the adherents of Methodism.

The authorship of the idea of establishing a college for the education of American Methodists must be assigned to Dr. Thos. Coke. Sent from England by Wesley to be superintendent of the churches, Coke had not been two weeks in the country, when at his first meeting with Asbury at Barrett's Chapel, Dover, Delaware, he spoke of the founding of an institution of higher learning under the control of the church. Himself a man of fine education, Coke appreciated its value and knowing thoroughly the design of Wesley with regard to his Kingswood

schools, he hoped that in this new world some similar institution might be established. Such an idea, it is true, was not new to Asbury. Three or four years previously, Rev. John Dickins had suggested that schools be opened in America, on the model of the Kingswood one, and the suggestion being well received, subscription papers had been drawn up. Coke however, wished to go beyond the curriculum of Kingswood and planned for a college. Asbury accepted Coke's idea and, with dauntless courage, the little church resolved to have a college and founded one at the Christmas Conference, which soon followed this meeting of the two bishops. The Conference raised forty-five pounds towards the endowment and gave the new institution the name—Cokesbury, compounded from the names of the bishops.

The enthusiasm of the Methodists was great. Before the Conference met, £1000 sterling had been subscribed and this self-denial on the part of the members of the church made it possible to purchase

ground and to begin the college building. Over a third of the Methodists of the United States were in Maryland and in this State, the scene of Strawbridge's early labors, the college found a fitting home. For a site, Abingdon was chosen because of its central position. On the main highway between Baltimore and Philadelphia and within a short distance of the Chesapeake Bay, access to the institution established here would be easy from many directions. A new church, built in 1784 and still standing, could be used as the College Chapel. The situation was elevated and healthy. The surroundings were beautiful. Of these Coke wrote "The place delights me more than ever. There is not, I believe, a point of it from which the eye has not a view of at least 20 miles, and in some parts, the prospect extends even to 50 miles in length. The water front forms one of the most beautiful views in the United States; the Chesapeake Bay in all its grandeur, with a fine navigable river, the Susquehanna, which empties into it, lying exposed to

view through a great extent of country."

Here they decided to build the college and hither came Asbury on June 5, 1785, to lay the corner stone and preach the "foundation sermon". He tells us he "had liberty in speaking and faith to believe that the work would go on." The purchase of four acres of land adjoining the new church, from Richard Dallam, for £60, had been agreed upon by Coke on May 30th. The work did go on briskly. The bishops, "as they passed over the country everywhere," called on "the people to come to the aid of the noble undertaking." With the funds they collected, land was bought for a building and the college hall erected at an expense estimated at over £4,000. The amount of this sum is the most noteworthy, when we remember that it represented an average contribution of over $1 from every Methodist church member in the country. To manage this property, fifteen trustees were selected, of whom five were traveling preachers, five residents of Baltimore, two each from the Eastern Shore and

Delaware, and one from Annapolis. It was planned that "as many of the students as possible shall be lodged and boarded in the town of Abingdon, among our pious friends," and that only those who cannot be so lodged and boarded, shall be provided in the college." With this policy the trustees made the dormitory accommodations in the building comparatively small, and were able to give more space to recitation rooms, &c. The building, of which no representation is known to be extant, was of brick, 108 feet in length, and 40 in width, facing east and west. It was described as standing on the "summit and centre of six acres of land, with an equal descent and proportion of ground on each side." It was three stories in height and divided into two parts. The east and west ends had on each floor two rooms, in size 25 by 20 feet. On the first floor in the centre of the building was the college hall, 40 feet square; over it, on the second floor, two school rooms, and, on the third floor, two bed rooms. Such was the arrangement

of the interior of the building, which the enthusiastic Methodists thought in "dimensions and style of architecture, fully equal, if not superior to anything of the kind in the country."

As soon as the house was under roof and a room or two finished, in their desire to put the place to immediate use, the trustees opened a preparatory school with 15 scholars, taught by Mr. Freeman Marsh, who was a Quaker. For a president of the institution, appeal was made to Mr. John Wesley, to recommend some one. Wesley suggested Rev. Mr. Heath, master of a Grammar School in Kidderminster, England, whom he believed "fully qualified to preside" over Cokesbury. On December 23, 1786 Asbury and the trustees voted to accept this recommendation and to call Mr. Heath. This vote was forwarded to Dr. Coke, who was then in England, and the position was formally offered by him to Mr. Heath on January 23, 1787. The letter communicating the offer is preserved in the rooms of the Methodist Historical Society in

Baltimore and is of great interest. Heath is told not to decide hastily, for the college will not be opened until after Coke's return in the coming autumn. If he accept the presidency of the college he is to receive 60 pounds sterling, "lodging in the college, board, washing, &c. for himself and family." The intention is to have two assistant masters, who must be unmarried. At the opening, it was hoped that there would be 50 scholars; but accommodations for double that number would be provided in the college building. "The college is intended," Coke writes, "1st, for the sons of our preachers, 2ndly, for the sons of our friends, 3dly, for our young men (preachers) to qualify and perfect themselves from time to time in the English language, and 4thly, for orphans." Coke fears that the profession of the name "college," will hardly be carried out by the curriculum of the institution, at any rate for some time, and he writes apologetically, "we give high names to things in America." It is a reproach against us,

which we have heard reiterated in more recent days.

Whatever might have been the present accomplishment, the purpose of the founders was high. They struggled towards a noble ideal. Heath accepted the position and with Mr. Patrick McClosky, who was to be a teacher in the institution, came to America in the autumn of 1787. Asbury had been to Cokesbury early in September, fixing the "price of board and the time for opening the college" and examining the students. In December, he returned to preside at Heath's inauguration, where he preached on three successive days. His choice of texts was noticeable. On the first day he preached from "Trust in the Lord and do good," on the second from "O man of God, there is death in the pot," which was looked back upon in time to come as a passage of disaster, and, on the third, from "They shall not labor in vain." The enterprise was fairly launched, though there was some difficulty from the scarcity of money. Heath

began with 25 students, with McClosky and Marsh as assistants. Shortly after his inauguration, in January, 1788, Wesley wrote him from London, telling him, "You are now setting up a Christian school, concerning which I will give my advice, the result of long consideration and much experience, which you are at liberty to take or leave." Wesley feels "pretty well acquainted" with educational matters, having had his thoughts engaged thereon for above forty years and strongly urges on Heath a course of study, modeled upon that of the school at Kingswood. This is "the best and the shortest method which can be taken to make children critical scholars in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew." Wesley sent a detailed scheme of what he wants the curriculum to be and tells Heath: "Whatever your former method of teaching has been, I advise you to adopt this." Probably so to do would not have been to carry out Coke's plans, for the latter was aiming not at school, but at a true college.

It is not likely however, that Marsh had an opportunity to test Wesley's system, for in the following summer, he severed his connection with the college, owing to some charge of inefficiency. Asbury believed he was incompetent, but Wesley always retained respect for and confidence in him and left him a legacy in his will. About the same time Mr. McClosky bought a farm on the Gunpowder River and resigned his place as teacher. Neither teacher had been connected with the institution for a year. For some cause, Mr. Marsh left even before the others, so no instructor was left. The evil effect of these losses is shown by the fact that a year later, there were only 30 scholars.

In the middle of September 1788, Asbury came to Abingdon and arranged "the temporal concerns of the college." As a result, Dr. Jacob Hall, of Abingdon, was made president. He is said to have "had a good reputation for general scholarship and especially for his knowledge of Greek and Latin." The fact that he

was a "native of the State and favorably known," caused an increase in the number of students. He remained in charge of the college so long as it was at Abingdon. His associates were Rev. John Hargrove, who afterwards accepted the doctrines of Swedenborg and founded the first church of that denomination in Baltimore; Rev. Joseph Toy, who came from New Jersey at the earnest entreaty of Asbury to take the chairs of Mathematics and English Literature; and Charles Tait, who had charge of the students on the charity foundation and taught French. He was afterwards United States Senator from Georgia and Judge of the United States District Court in Alabama. Mr. McCloskey seems to have returned before 1790, and was a teacher in the College, almost up till the time of his death in 1791.

Under these instructors, the institution made good progress. Conference adjourned there yearly, when it had finished its business in Baltimore, and after such a visit in 1791, Coke wrote with joy "We

have more than 70 pupils. Dr. Hall, the president, and the three tutors do honor to the institution. Many from the Southern States are sending their young men here to finish their education. The fear of God seems to pervade the college." He expresses much pleasure at the progress of some of the pupils, "especially those who studied the different branches of the mathematics." So well were matters prospering, that he wrote: "if it were not for the suspicions of some and the pride and ignorance of others, I am of the opinion I could make provision by collections, profits on books, and donations in land, to take 2,000 children under the best plan of education ever known in this country. The Lord begins to smile on our (Kingswood) Cokesbury School. One promising young man has gone forth into the ministry, another is ready, and several have been under great awakenings. None so healthy and orderly as our children and some promise great talents for learning. The obstinate and ignorant oppose among preachers and

people; while the judicious for good sense and piety in Church and State admire and applaud." The mention of profits on books reminds us that in 1792, Conference voted to give $4,000 therefrom to the College.

Whether any formal graduation exercises were ever held, or any degrees conferred is not certain. Probably, if there had been any, Asbury would have mentioned the fact in his Journal. As to the curriculum, we know nothing but what is contained in the circular sent out by the bishops in 1785 and later annually published in the Methodist Discipline. According to this "the students will be instructed in English, Latin, Greek, logic, rhetoric, history, geography, natural philosophy, and astronomy. To these languages and sciences will be added, when the finances of our college will admit of it, the Hebrew, French and German languages. But our first object shall be to answer the designs of Christian education by forming the minds of the youth through Divine aid to wisdom and holiness, by instilling into

their minds the principles of true religion — speculative, experimental and practical— and training them in the ancient way that they may be rational, spiritual Christians. We have consented to receive children of seven years of age, as we wish to have the opportunity of teaching "the young idea how to shoot" and gradually forming their minds, through the Divine blessing, almost from their infancy to holiness and heavenly wisdom, as well as human learning." This was the idea of the founders, and from the circular we get other details of the plan, often queer and fantastic enough. "In teaching the languages care shall be taken to read those authors and those only who join together the purity, strength and the elegance of their several tongues, and the utmost caution shall be used that nothing immodest be found in any of our books. As far, then, as is consistnt with the foregoing observations a choice and universal library shall be provided for the use of the students."

The rules of government were stern and rigid and directed almost every move-

ment of the pupils. We wonder what sort of boys the trustees expected to receive, and what their idea of boys was, when we read that the students must not indulge in anything which the world calls play. "Let this rule be observed," they say, "with the strictest nicety, for those who play, when they are young, will play when they are old." Instead of games, the students are to find their recreation in employments, which are of "the greatest public utility, agriculture and architecture." The former they are to study in connection with Virgil's Georgics, the latter they are to pursue in a "taberna lignaria," or carpenter shop, where a skilful person should oversee them. Gardening was a third recreation in which the pupils might indulge and they might even bathe in a pool, one at a time, under the supervision of a master. No one should remain in the water above a minute, nor bathe in Bush River. The trustees claimed that, in prohibiting play, they had the support of Locke and Rousseau. It is a remarkable proof of

liberality for a body of religious men to quote the latter in those days and to add that, though he "was essentially mistaken in his religious system, yet his wisdom in other respects and extensive genius are indisputably acknowledged."

I imagine there must have been some difficulty in enforcing such rules and read with interest the statement that in 1790, the Methodist ministry gravely discussed the question, "Can anything be done to prevent the students of Cokesbury College from trafficking or exchanging their property with each other." The students should study seven hours daily, should rise at 4 a. m., and be in bed by 9 p. m. This early rising was felt by the trustees to be of "vast importance both to body and mind," "preserving a good and improving a bad constitution," and "preventing and removing" nervous complaints. Under these rules matters moved on until 1794.

The financial management of the college had not been successful. For some cause or other the institution had been steadily

running into debt for some years and the collections in the churches seemed to be falling off. In September, 1789, the debt was £1636. At last we find Asbury writing in his journal, "Our college matters now come to a pause. We now make a sudden and dead pause; we mean to incorporate and breathe and take some better plan. If we cannot have a Christian school, (i. e. a school under Christain discipline and pious teachers,) we will have none." I do not fully understand the meaning, which is evidently implied in the last sentence, but some crisis was clearly at hand. The project of incorporation was by no means unopposed. Previously, the entire management of the institution had been in the hands of the Conference. To take this management out of the hands of the church and place it in the hands of trustees, who should fill vacancies in their own numbers, was a "step disliked by many."

It was a step which was carried out, however, and on the 26th of December, 1794, the Legislature of Maryland granted

a charter—the first one ever given to a Methodist college. The charter is modeled on that of Washington College, at Chestertown, whose charter in turn was modeled by Rev. William Smith on "the additional charter of the University of Pennsylvania," granted in 1755. Cokesbury is authorized to hold public commencements and "admit any of the students belonging to the said seminary, (or any other persons meriting the same) to any degree or degrees usually given in any of the faculties, arts and sciences, and liberal professions to which persons are usually admitted in other colleges or universities in America or Europe."

The charter did not save the college. Its financial affairs were in such bad state that the Conference of 1795 passed a resolution that the collegiate department should be suspended and that only an English free school should be kept. In such a case was Cokesbury, when its last hopes for life as a college were cut off by fire. Once before, in 1788, there had been an incendiary attempt, which had

been unsuccessful; but now a similar attempt, on December 4, 1795, caused the building to burn to the ground, and with the building, the library and philosophical apparatus were lost.

The whole span of the life of the first American Methodist educational institution from Coke's conversation with Asbury to the second fire in Baltimore, was a little over twelve years. They had been years of hard struggling and they ended in failure. So the men of the time viewed it; but the failure was by no means a total one. An example had been set for future generations and the Methodist Church had clearly set before it a high ideal, the ideal of Cokesbury—to give the students in its schools and colleges a "finished education," and, "though our principal object is to instruct them in the doctrines, spirit and practice of Christianity, yet we trust our college will in due time send forth men that shall be a blessing to this country in any laudable office and employment of life, thereby uniting the two greater ornaments of human beings, which are too often separated, deep learning and genuine piety."